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ABSTRACT

When students are faced with a death in the school, the school needs a plan to help students through the experience. Teachers should create a secure atmosphere in which students can share their feelings, ideas, and beliefs with classmates and teachers. Objectives of the plan involve students seeing death as a natural part of life, pursuing personality growth, increasing self-awareness, and understanding the stages of grieving. Guidelines for helping students deal with death include letting students express their feelings, using simple and direct language about death, helping students know they are not responsible for the death, presenting material in a nonmoralistic fashion, being sensitive to students who have emotional reactions, telling students the truth, and telling students that adults do not have all the answers. Numerous books that deal with death and dying are available for use in the school. Some strategies that may be used consist of considering the child's past experiences, speaking in a calm natural tone of voice, meeting individual needs, listening to the child, addressing the child's fears, and encouraging the child to interact with family members. Includes a list of books dealing with death and dying. (KS)

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ED 369 634

WORKING TOGETHER: WHEN DEATH COMES TO SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

Dealing with death is a complicated matter that admits no easy resolutions. The focus of this project is to guide administrators, teachers, school personnel, parents, community support persons, families, and students in making decisions that ease the passage of the crisis of dealing with death in their school setting. Hopefully, there will be a time to develop a school plan before the crisis rather than school action procedure after the experience.

Should the school be closed and students left to get support from a home where the parent may be working or should the school assume a nurturing role during a school crisis? That choice will determine the course of action for the school setting and the time for the use of the materials in this project.

By being prepared to cope with death that impacts on a student, a class, a school, or an entire system, teachers will be better able to assist their students when the need arises. Unfortunately, this need is more frequent than most people believe. It is strongly suggested that all school system personnel be included in the staff development.

PURPOSE

To help students think through and learn about issues surrounding death, dying, and grief in a supportive environment, when they are forced

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to deal with these issues in a personal crisis. When a crisis occurs, a student often is able, with the help of his peers and school staff, to work through many feelings which are unresolved.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will see death as a natural, expected, and manageable part of life. They will increasingly value life, their own and others' whom they love and give thought to the use of time and living.

2. Students will pursue overall personality growth in the small group experience.

3. Students will increase self-awareness; exploring ideas, plans, and personal preferences of their own and significant others (hopefully group discussions will lead to family interaction in the home).

4. Students will understand the stages of grieving and expected behaviors. They will learn coping strategies for themselves and ways to care for others who grieve (Salter, 1982, pp 1-2).

{***Be certain to include your special education teachers in your lesson plan materials that are shared during a crisis. Select with care the activities if you find yourself in the middle of a crisis without warning.***}

GUIDELINES FOR HELPING STUDENTS DEAL WITH DEATH

Death is a very sensitive topic to discuss in the school setting. Teachers should be aware of the following strategies that can be used as needed. Numerous pitfalls should be avoided and various positive actions should be taken. It seems simplistic to list do's and don'ts; however, such a list may be helpful in initiating death education. Because of space limitations, the list is limited to a few important suggestions.

1. ***LET STUDENTS EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS AND OPINIONS.***

It is important to let students know that expressing their feelings is normal and desirable. Too often we tell others to "Be brave" or "Don't take it so hard" because we are uncomfortable seeing students upset. These feelings should not be repressed.

2. ***USE SIMPLE AND DIRECT LANGUAGE IN EXPLAINING THINGS ABOUT DEATH.*** A very complicated or detailed explanation may confuse children. Remember that students are at different developmental levels in terms of their ability to understand the concept of death. Help children to understand death by saying, "Mary has died. It is not like make-believe cartoons or cops and robbers. It is real. Mary is dead. But we still have our memories of her. Use a soft tone of voice.

3. ***BEGIN WITH MATERIAL THAT AROUSES THE LEAST EMOTION AND PROGRESS TO SUBJECTS THAT AROUSE THE MOST EMOTION.*** In this way students will be able to get used to talking about death and will be less likely to be overwhelmed.

4. ***HELP STUDENTS KNOW THAT THEY ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE.*** Often children have magical thinking related to death and believe that wishing someone was dead or thinking bad thoughts about someone causes that person to die. Reassure students that this is not the case.

5. ***PRESENT MATERIAL IN A NONMORALISTIC FASHION.*** In relation to the topic of an afterlife, it is best for the teacher to present the idea that some people believe in an afterlife and some do not. Students can be asked to explore this topic with their parents, guardian or special friend. If they go to a church or a synagogue, they can explore the topic there.

6. ***BE SENSITIVE TO STUDENTS WHO MAY HAVE EMOTIONAL OR NEGATIVE REACTIONS.*** Although most students will have positive reactions, some may experience increased anxiety about death, nightmares, or insomnia. Occasionally students may be visibly upset in class. These reactions do not necessarily mean that the student should no longer participate. Sometimes allowing a child to be upset may be therapeutic. Of course, professional judgment in each individual case must be used.

7. ***TELL STUDENTS THAT SICKNESS MAY BE THE CAUSE OF DEATH BUT EXPLAIN IN DETAIL.*** It might be helpful to explain that only a very serious illness may cause death and that we all get sick sometimes but we almost always get better. Otherwise, students might be afraid of death when confronted with minor illnesses. Similarly, it is unwise to explain the cause of death as being old age. Statements such as, "Grandma died because she was old" will become confusing when students see that younger persons die as well. It might be better to explain to the students that most people live a long time and that you expect them to live a long time, too.

8. ***TELL STUDENTS THE TRUTH.*** Do not tell students things that are false, do not tell students that a dead person is sleeping or has gone on a long trip. These explanations can cause undue fear of sleeping or trips. Students will find out that these explanations are not true.

9. ***TELL STUDENTS THAT YOU DO NOT HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS ABOUT DEATH.*** Let them know that there are some things that are not understood about death (Brookshire and Noland, 1985, pp. 77-78).

RESOURCES

A good point to start is to make a list of books and resources available in the local schools, public libraries, and various community agencies. After much research and evaluation, the authors chose to focus the resources on printed material. It is easy in a time of crisis to share books and very comforting to have someone read to you. The authors believe that one of the staff activities for a school would be to select audio visual and reading materials that reflect the school and community population.

THE FOLLOWING BOOKS DEAL WITH DEATH AND DYING:

1. About Dying
2. The Accident (Pet)
3. Adolescent suicide

4. Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl
5. Annie and the Old One
6. Badger's Parting Gift
7. Blackberries in the Dark (Grandparent)
8. Bridge to Terabithia (Friend)
9. Charlotte's Web (Friend)
10. Death and Dying: Closing the Circle (1/2" video)
11. Explaining Death to Children
12. Facing Death
13. The Fall of Freddie The Leaf
14. How It Feels When A Parent Dies
15. The Kids Book About Death and Dying
16. Letting Go With Love: The Grieving Process
17. Life Times
18. My Grandson Lew (Grandparent)
19. Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs (Grandparent)
20. Responding to Adolescent Suicide
21. A Summer to Die (Friend)
22. A Taste of Blackberries (Friend)
23. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney (Pet)
24. Tuck Everlasting
25. The Two of Them (Grandparent)
26. Where the Red Fern Grows

For more specific book information and additional titles contact :

Coastal GLRS, 912-927-5239

SUPPORT PERSONNEL
SHOULD BE AWARE OF THE
FOLLOWING STRATEGIES TO BE USED AS NEEDED

--***Consider the child's past experiences***--death of a pet or the life cycle of plants--in your explanation.

--***Look for cues of the child's feelings.*** If they aren't apparent, ask him/her directly, "How do you feel about this?"

--**Make explanations in a calm, natural tone of voice.**

Although it's healthy to show your own sorrow, if you are extremely upset, wait until you calm down so that the child is not frightened.

--***Be honest and truthful.*** Never give a child an explanation you can't accept.

--***Let the child have his feelings of anger, depression, whatever.*** Don't tell him/her not to "say those things" or "ask those questions."

--***Make things appear no better and no worse than they are.*** Some examples of what you might say include: "He was old and his body wore out." "Some diseases are curable, others are not." "He had a disease we can't cure yet, so he died. Maybe we'll be able to cure other people who have the same disease." "We will not see him again, but we sure have wonderful memories to think about."

--***Meet individual needs.*** A child may need a hug and a shoulder to cry on, or he might need to be alone for awhile.

--***Allow the child to share in the grieving process and to attend the funeral if the mature child requests permission.*** Never force a child to do something he doesn't feel comfortable with. That might only make him feel guilty for not going.

--***Listen to the child and hear what the child is telling you.***

--***The child maybe afraid of what happened to a member of the family, will also happen to him.*** The child may feel guilty. "That should've been me that died, not my daddy or my mommy."

--***The child may be afraid to talk about the lost loved one.***

--***Have the child bring a picture of the person that has died.*** Look at the picture together. Talk about happy memories. This is a particularly healing activity. Recall as many happy memories as possible.

--***Be sure to stress that there was no way the child could have prevented the death.***

--***Encourage the child to interact with family members.*** The child should be included in all family activities. The family love and closeness is comforting. Shielding a child from circumstances makes the child more fearful. Have the family to plan activities together and do things together in the days to come. Go to the movies, outings, shopping, etc. Plan activities with the child's friends...Keep Busy!

--***When the child is feeling angry about his loss, teach him/ her to express negative feelings by hitting a pillow, crying, or whatever the child needs to do to relieve the stress and sorrow.***

--***And most of all, if the child is feeling fearful, "Talk.*** Only by sharing the child's feelings of fear with someone can the child trust you and begin to deal with his feelings. Coping with death is not easy, but it can teach a great deal about yourself...you are not alone with your fears. Learning to cope with death means learning to live" (Brookshire, 1981, pp. 1-2).

SUMMARY

The primary aim of this project is to provide the teacher with a direction to create a secure atmosphere in which students can share their feelings, ideas, and beliefs with classmates and teachers. Students should be encouraged to express themselves freely and realize that there are few absolutely right or wrong answers. To provide a safe atmosphere, the teacher should offer warm support to all students and show a sincere interest in listening to the comments of students. Often this type of discussion will lead to choices between alternative courses of action that will result in guiding students to the kind of future decisions they will consider when dealing with death on a public or private matter of concern.

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